

On the Sacred Priesthood

This paper is an examination of Christian priesthood from the perspectives of both Old and New Testaments as understood by the Syro-Chaldean Church and the Communion of Evangelical National Catholic Churches.

Definition of Terms

In The Biblical and Ecclesial Teachings of the Syro-Chaldean Church and the Communion of Evangelical National Catholic Churches, Bishop and Priest are defined as follows:

BISHOPS

Within the Church and under Christ, the Bishop is the head, the pastor and overseer. He follows in the apostolic calling of the Twelve who were chosen by Christ Himself, and who chose their successors.

The fullness of the presbyterate is found in the bishop. He fully represents the priesthood of the People of God...

PRESBYTERS (ELDERS)

Presbyters, or priests, are men whom the Bishop ordains from among the diaconate to share in his preaching, teaching and pastoral responsibilities. The presbyters assist the Bishop in his work. They are delegated by the Bishop to preside over the sacramental worship of the people and to pastor individual congregations. The presbyters join the Bishop as he leads Christ's Church on earth.

For the purposes of this paper, and for use within the Syro-Chaldean Church of North America and the Communion of Evangelical National Catholic Churches, the following working definitions of priest and bishop will be used. Both bishop and priest function within the priesthood.

The Bishop

The bishop, as successor to the Twelve Apostles, oversees the fundamental unit of the Church of Jesus Christ (the diocese) as its chief priest and pastor. He bears responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and to exercise spiritual oversight, care and protection to those under his charge. As such, the bishop represents the Church to the world and protects the Church from the attack of worldly enemies. The bishop represents, sacramentally, the Church before God in offering the Eucharistic sacrifice at the altar, and represents God to the Church in bringing the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ to the people. In his representational nature and by the imparted grace of the Holy Spirit, the bishop carries within himself the fullness of Apostolic ministry. The bishop is the shepherd of the flock of Christ, serving under and by the authority of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Under Christ the bishop is the head of the Church.

The bishop bears this responsibility and exercises this authority within the realm of his pastoral care, the diocese. Collectively, all the bishops bear this responsibility and exercise this authority for the whole Church as they are gathered to function in and through the college of bishops, the Episcopal Synod. Metropolitans, archbishops, provincial bishops, and presidents or moderators of the Episcopal Synod exercise additional authority over work in missionary districts, as representatives of the greater church to the world, and as administrators of the acts of the Synod. They also are to command and exercise the authority of service, example and respect in dealings with their brother bishops and over the greater areas of their responsibility.

Priests

Priests share in the ministry and authority of the bishop by ordination and delegation. The priests together, forming the presbytery, serve as advisors to the bishop as men who speak by the grace of the Holy Spirit and from the wisdom of experience in prayer, service and leadership. Priests function in the same sacramental role as the bishop but by the bishop's authority and delegation. Priests serve as the bishop's extension in pastoral ministries to which the bishop has appointed them. The priesthood is both presbyterial and hieratic (these terms will be explained below). Presbyterial in that the priest is an elder, bearing an elder's responsibility and having an elder's experience and wisdom. Hieratic in that the priest is the sacramental representative of the Church to God and of God to the Church in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and other sacramental functions.

Confusion of Terms

There has been much confusion through the centuries, especially in the West over the use and definition of the word *priest*. A brief look at the terms used in Scripture and translated in English will yield a better understanding of the office in both its presbyterial and hieratic natures.

The English word *priest* is derived from the Greek word *πρεσβύτερος* (presbuteros) which means elder from which we also get the words *presbyter* and *presbyterial*. (In earlier forms of English *presbyter* was contracted to *prester* and thence to *priest*) It is used to translate into English the Hebrew word כֹּהֵן (kohen, cohen) and its Greek equivalent, *ἱερεύς* (hiereus) used in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, and in the Greek New Testament to refer to the Hebrew Temple priesthood. The Greek speaking church uses the Greek word *ἱερεύς* (hiereus) to refer to the modern Christian priest. This Greek word gives us the term *hieratic*, referring to that which pertains to the sacramental priesthood and, under the Old Testament dispensation, the Temple priesthood. The use of a word in English which really means *elder* to refer to one who is the sacrificial intermediary between God and mankind has generated much of the confusion which besets us today. Additional confusion has been generated by the fact that the office of Christian priest, especially as we use it in the modern church does not appear in the New Testament while the offices of bishop (overseer), pastor and deacon do all appear.

The Representational Nature of the Priesthood

A priest stands as a representative. He represents man before God and God before man. He offers prayer and sacrifice on behalf of the people to God. This has always been so and is true in all cultures and religions. We will look at this as it is portrayed and taught in Holy Scripture.

In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, even before the law on priests was set down by Moses, there are examples of priests functioning as intermediaries between God and an individual or community. Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, and Jethro, priest of Midian, are two.

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he [Abraham] gave him [Melchizedek] a tenth of all. (Genesis 14:18-19)

Now Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt... So Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the

people.” Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses' father-in-law before God. (Exodus 18:1,10-12)

Another example of the intermediary function of the priesthood is shown in God's consecration of the nation of Israel to be a holy priesthood and, as such, to serve as the channel through which redemption would come to all nations.

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’” (Exodus 19:3-6)

The priestly tribe of Levi stood as a permanent representative of all the tribes of Israel before God, standing in the place of the firstborn which was consecrated to God in eternal commemoration of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the slaying of the firstborn of Egypt.

Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Now, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the sons of Israel instead of every first-born, the first issue of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be Mine.” (Numbers 3:11-12)

The priest served both God and man. He served God as minister to Him, offering worship and caring for the holy things.

“Then bring near to yourself Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the sons of Israel, to minister as priest to Me-- Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.” (Exodus 28:1)

“And you shall put them on Aaron your brother and on his sons with him; and you shall anoint them and ordain them and consecrate them, that they may serve Me as priests.” (Exodus 28:41)

“And I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me... And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps. And when Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. There shall be perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.” (Exodus 29:44, 30:7-8)

The priest served man as the one to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people to atone for their sins, to give thanks to the Lord and to seek His provision and protection.

“And he shall slay the young bull before the LORD; and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting.” (Leviticus 1:5)

“The second he shall then prepare as a burnt offering according to the ordinance. So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf for his sin which he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him.” (Leviticus 5:10)

“Then the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and they shall be forgiven.” (Numbers 15:25)

In the New Testament

In the New Testament, we see this representational aspect of the priesthood fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17)

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. (Hebrews 3:1)

And the former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing, but He, on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens. (Hebrews 7:23-26)

Some think that since Jesus is our intermediary with God it is not legitimate for anyone else to take that role upon himself, yet we do see just this in the New Testament. Clearly, St. Paul saw himself functioning in this role on behalf of both God and men.

But I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:15-16)

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places... Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. (Ephesians 3:8-10, 13-16)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints. (Colossians 1:24-26)

Paul's acceptance of suffering on behalf of the Ephesians and the Colossians is representational and his intercession for them is that of a priestly intermediary. The apostle links these things closely with the priestly ministry of Christ in which he shares. We see this claim in his sharing, on behalf of Christ's body, in his afflictions, "filling up that which is lacking."

In the Revelation of St. John, we see elders sharing in God's authority and ministering to Him in holy worship.

And around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads... And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created." (Revelation 4:4,9-11)

And finally, we have the priestly function of the nation of Israel, the intermediary between the God and the world, being carried forward by the Church of Jesus Christ. Just as ancient Israel, a *royal priesthood*, was a nation that had within it the Levitical priesthood, so too the Church now serves as that same priestly people while containing within her a priesthood. The priesthood of all believers does not mean that all are priests for themselves or one another but that all together form that priesthood which serves to intercede before the Father on behalf of all mankind, offering as one our holy worship, and to bring to all mankind the blessings of salvation bestowed by God the Father through the death and resurrection of His Son, our great high priest by proclamation, exhortation and example.

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (I Peter 2:5)

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (I Peter 2:9)

To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen... "And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." (Revelation 1:5b-6,10)

The Pastoral Nature of the Priesthood

In addition to their sacramental, representational function, priests also served and continue to serve in pastoral roles. The priest, as representative of both God and the community, is its leader and, as such, bears responsibility for the welfare of the community. We will now look at passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament which demonstrate this.

In the Old Testament

In ancient Israel, the priest functioned in many pastoral roles to care for, provide for, protect from both internal and external threats, discipline, judge and edify the people. The priest was responsible for, among other things, adjudicating disputes, administering the distribution of the land, leading in war and administering public health. The passages below illustrate these points. In addition one may look to Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 to see the responsibility the priest had to protect the nation from disease.

"These are the names of the men who shall apportion the land to you for inheritance: Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun." (Numbers 34:17)

"If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses. So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them, and they will declare to you the verdict in the case." (Deuteronomy 17:8-9)

And Moses sent them, a thousand from each tribe, to the war, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war with them, and the holy vessels and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand. (Numbers 31:6)

“Now it shall come about that when you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them.’” (Deuteronomy 20:2-3)

In the New Testament

In the New Testament, we see this pastoral function fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, “the Shepherd and Bishop of [our] souls” (1 Peter 2:25). Even though it was fulfilled in Him, it was carried out by individuals serving Him and His Church. We see the Twelve Apostles given and exercising authority in both spiritual and material affairs. We see elders serving with authority and exercising pastoral care. We also see various pastoral ministries delineated. The following passages from the New Testament illustrate these points. It is important to note that in the book of Acts the elders of the Christian community are associated with the Apostles in much the same way that the Jewish elders were associated with the Chief Priests in the Gospels and in Acts.

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19) (*Jesus is speaking to the Apostles.*)

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” (John 20:21-23)

And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need. (Acts 4:33-35)

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue... And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. (Acts 15:2,6)

Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. (Acts 16:4)

And from Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, “...Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:17, 28)

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14)

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (I Peter 5:1-4)

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. (I Timothy 2:1)

The Apostle John refers to himself as the Elder in the first verse of both his second and third letters.

Summary of The Nature of the Priestly Ministry

We can see from the passages of Scripture presented above that the priestly ministry is one of representing God to the people and the people to God. It is one of intercession with God on behalf of the people. It is one of pastoral oversight and authority. It is one of provision and protection. In all this the priestly ministry incorporates certain elements that may be separated out in other ministries carried out by those who are not priests, such as intercessory prayer, the ministry of healing, adjudication, administration, diaconal service and others. However, it is the priestly function alone to exercise divine authority over the people of God, to bear responsibility before Him for them, and to preside over the corporate sacramental worship of the body of Christ.

Promulgation

This teaching, *On the Sacred Priesthood*, is hereby promulgated by the Episcopal Synod of the Evangelical Apostolic Church of North America, this 25th day of February, 1996. It is to be received by all members as the teaching of the Church.

© The Evangelical Apostolic Church of North America, 1996. All rights reserved.

© The Syro-chaldean Church of North America, 2016. All rights reserved.

All Scripture passages are quoted from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright THE LOCKMAN FOUNDATION, La Habra, California.